### Laurel Run.

BY BRET HARTE.

CHAPTER I.

The mail stage had just passed Laurel iun. So rapidly that the whirling cloud of dust dragged with it down the steep grade from the summit hung over the level long after the stage had vanished, and then, drifting away, slowly sifted a red precipitate over the hot platform of the Laurel Run post

Out of this cloud presently emerged the neat figure of the postmistress with the mail bag which had been dexterously flung at her feet from the top of the A dozen loungers passing vehicle. sagerly stretched out their hands to assist her, but the warning: "It's agin the rules, boys, for any but her to touch it" from a bystander and a coquettish shake of the head from the postmistress herself-much more effective than any official interdict-withheld them. The bag was not heavy—Laurel Run was too recent a settlement to have attracted much correspondence-and the young woman, having pounced upon her prey with a certain feline instinct, dragged it, not without difficulty, behind the partitioned inclosure in the office and locked the door. Her pretty face, momentarily visible through the window, was slightly flushed with the exertion, and the loose ends of her fair hair, wet with perspiration, curled themselves over her forehead into tantalizing little rings. But the window shutter was quickly closed and this momentary but charming vision withdrawn from the waiting public.

"Gov'ment oughter have more sense than to make a woman pick mail bags outer the road," said Jo Simmons, sym-pathetically. "'Tain't in her day's pathetically. "'Tain't in her day's work, anyhow; gov'ment oughter hand 'em over to her like a lady; it's rich enough and ugly enough.'

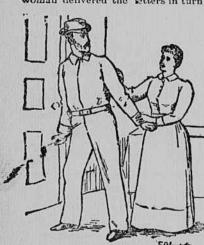
"'Tain't government; it's that stage company's airs and graces," interrupted a newcomer. "They think it mighty fine to go beltin' by makin' everybody take their dust just because stoppin' ain't in their contract. expressman who chucked down the bag had any feelin's for a lady"—but he stopped here at the amused faces of his

"Guess you don't know much o' that expressman's feelin's, stranger," said "Why, you oughter see him just pussin' that had like a baby as he comes tearin' down the grade and then rise up and sorter heave it to Mrs. Baker ez if it was a five-dollar bokay. His feelin's for her? Why, he's give himself so dead away to her that we're looking for him to forget what he's doin' next and just come a sailin' down hisself at her feet."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the partition, Mrs. Baker had brushed the red dust from the padlocked bag, and removed what seemed to be a plementary package attached to it by a Opening itshe found a handsome scent-bottle, evidently a superadded gift from the devoted expressman. This she put aside with a light smile and the murmured word: "Foolishness." But when she had unlocked the bag, even its sacred interior was profaned by a covert parcel from the adjacent postimaster at Burat Ridge, containing a gold "specimen" brooch and some circus tickets. It was laid aside with tickets. This also was vanity—and pre-

There were seventeen letters in all, of which five were for herself -and yet the proportion was small that morning. Two of them were marked "Official business," and were promptly put by with feminine discernment; but in an other compartment than that holding the presents. Then the shutter was opened and the task of delivery commenced.

It was accompanied with a social peculiarity that had in time become a habit of Laurel Run. As the young woman delivered the letters in turn to



"GO, JOHN; I WILL WAIT FOR YOU HERE."

the men who were patiently drawn up in Indian file, she made that simple act a medium of privileged but limited con-versation on special or general topics gay or serious as the case might be-or the temperament of the man sug-gested. That it was almost always of gested. That it was almost always of a complimentary character on their part, may be readily imagined; but it was invariably characterized by an element of refined restraint, and, whether from some implied understanding or individual sense of honor—it never passed the bounds of conventionality or a cer-tain delicacy of respect. The delivery was, consequently, more or less pro-tracted, but when each man had ex-changed his three or four minutes' con-versation with the fair postmistress—, conversation at times impeded by bash fulness or timidity, on his part solely, or restricted often to vague smiling-he resignedly made way for the next. It was a formal levee, mitigated by the in-formality of rustic tact, great good burner and infinite patience, and would

have been amusing had it not always been terribly in earnest and at times touching. For it was peculiar to the touching. For it was peculiar to the place and the epoch, and, indeed, im-plied the whole history of Mrs. Baker.

She was the wife of John Baker, foreman of "The Last Chance," now of crushed and beaten-in tunnel at Burnt Ridge. There had been a sudden outery from the depths at high hot noontide one day, and John had rushed from his cabin, his young, foolish, flirting wife clinging to him, to answer that despairing cry. But she rose suddenly with a pale face and said: "Go, John; I will wait for you here." He went; the men were freedbut she had waited for him ever since.

Yet in the shock of the calamity and in the after struggles of that poverty which had come to the ruined camp she had scarcely changed. But the men had. Although she was to all appearances the same giddy, pretty Betsy Baker who had been so disturbing to the younger members, they seemed no longer to be disturbed by her. A certain subdued awe and re ect, as if the martyred spirit of John Baker still held his arm around her, seemed to have come upon them all. They held their breath as this pretty woman, whose brief mourning had not seemed to affect her cheerfulness or even playfulness of spirit, passed before them. But she stood by her cabin and the camp-the only woman in a settlement of forty men-during the darkest hours of their fortune, helping them to wash and cook and ministering to their domestic needs. The sanctity of her cabin was, however, always kept as inviolable as if it had been his tomb. No one exactly knew why, for it was only a tacit instinct; but even one or two who had not scrupled to pay court to Betsy Baker during John Baker's life shrank from even a suggestion of familiarity toward woman who had said that she would "wait for him there."

When brighter days came and the ettlement had increased by one or two families and laggard capital had been hurried up to relieve the still beleaguered and locked-up wealth of Burnt Ridge, the needs of the community and the claims of the widow of John Baker were so well told in politiquarters that the post office of Laurel Run was created expressly for Every man participated in the building of the pretty yet substantial edifice—the only public building in Laurel Run—that stood in the dust of the great highway, half a mile from the settlement. There she was installed for certain hours of the day, for she could not be prevailed upon to abandon John's cabin, and here, with all the added respect due to a public functionary, she was as secure in her But the blind devotion of Laurel Run

to John Baker's reliet did not stop here.

In its zeal to assure the government authorities of the necessity of a postoffice, and to secure a permanent competency to the postmistress, there was much embarrassing extravagance. During the first week the sale of stamps at Laurel Run post office was unprecedented in the annals of the department. Fancy prices were given for the first issue; then they were bought wildly, recklessly, unprofitably and on all occasions. Complimentary congratula-tions at the little window invariably ended with: "And a dollar's worth of stamps, Mrs. Baker." It was felt to be supremely delicate to buy only the highest priced stamps, without reference to their adequacy; then mere quantity was sought; then outgoing letters were all overpaid, and stamped in outrageous proportion to their weight and even size. The imbeeility of this, and its probable effect on the reputation of Laurel Run at the general st office being pointed out by Mrs. Baker, stamps were adopted as local currency, and even for decorative purposes on mirrors and the walls of cabins. Everybody wrote letters, with the result, however, that those sent were ludicrously and suspiciously in excess of those received. To obviate this, select parties made forced journeys to Hick-ory Hill, the next post office, with letters and circulars addressed to themselves at Laurel Run. How long the extravagance would have continued is not known, but it was not until it was

rumored that, in consequence of the excessive flow of business the depart-

ment had concluded that a postmaster would be better fitted for the place that it abated, and a compromise was ef-

fected with the general office by a per-manent salary to the postmistress.

Such was the history of Mrs. Baker, who had just finished her afternoon levee, nodded a smiling "good-by" to her last customer and closed her shutten again. Then she took up her own letters, but before reading them stepred ters, but before reading them glanced with a pretty impatience at the two official envelopes addressed to herself which she had shelved. They were generally a lot of new rules (?) or notifi-cations, or "absurd" questions which had nothing to do with Laurel Run, and only bothered her and "made her head ache," and she had usually referred them to her admiring neighbor at Hick-ory Hill for explanation, who had generally returned them to her with the brief indorsement: "Purp stuff; don't bother," or "Hog wash; let it slide." She remembered now that he had not re-turned the two last. With knitted brows and a slight port she put aside her private correspondence and tore open the first one. It referred with official curtness to an unanswered communication of the previous week, and was "compelled to remind her of rule 47." Again those horrid rules! She opened the others; the frown deepened on her brow, and became fixed.

It was a summary of certain valuable. money letters that had miscarried on the route, and of which they had given her previous information. For a mo-ment her cheeks blazed. How dare they; what did they mean? Her waybills and register were always right; she knew the names of every man, woman and child in her district; no such names as those borne by the miss-ing letters had ever existed at Laurel Run; no such addresses had ever been

mean insinuation! She would send in the resignation at once! She would send in her resignation at once! She would get the "boys" to write an insulting letter to Senator Slocumb—Mrs. Baker had the feminine idea of government as a purely personal institution—and she would find out who it was that had put them up to this prying, grawling imputes. them up to this prying, crawling impudence! It was probably that wall-eyed old wife of the postmaster of Heavy Tree Crossing, who was jealous of her. "Remind her of their previous unanswered communication," indeed! Where was that communication, anyway? She remembered she had sent it to her admirer at Hickory Hill. Odd that be hadn't answered it. Of course, he knew all about this meanness—could he too have dared to suspect her! The thought turned her crimson again. He, Stanton Green, was an old "Laurel Runner," a friend of John's, a little "triflin'" and "presoomin'," but still an old loyal pioneer of the camp! "Why hadn't he spoke up?"

There was the soft muffled fall of a horse's hoof in the thick dust of the highway, the jingle of dismounting spurs, and a firm tread on the platform. No doubt, one of the boys returning for few supplemental remarks under the feeble pretense of forgotten stamps. had been done before, and she had resented it as "cayotin' 'round;" but now she was eager to pour out her wrongs to the first comer. She had her hand im-pulsively on the door of the partition when she stopped with a new sense of her impaired dignity. Could she con-



fess this to her worshipers? But herethe door opened in her very face and a

He was a man of fifty, compactly and strongly built. A squarely cut goatee, slightly streaked with gray, fell straight from his thin-lipped but handsome mouth; his eyes were dark, humorous, yet searching. But the distinctive quality that struck Mrs. Baker was the blending of urban ease with frontier frankness. He was evidently a man who had seen cities and knew countries well. And while he was dressed with the comfortable simplicity of a Californian mounted traveler, her inexperienced but feminine eye detected the keynote of his respectability in the carefully tied bow of his cravat. Sierran throat was apt to be open, free and unfettered.

"Good morning, Mrs. Baker," he said. pleasantly, with his hat already in his

As he spoke his eyes swept approvingly over the neat inclosure, the primly-tied papers, and well-kept pigeon holes; the pot of flowers on her desk; her china silk mantle, and killing little chip hat, and ribbons hanging against the wall; thence to her own pink, flushed face, bright blue eyes, tendrilled clinging hair, and then—fell upon the leathern mailbag still lying across the table. Here it became fixed on the unfortunate wire of the amorous expressman that yet remained hanging from the brass wards of the lock, and he reached his hand toward it.

But little Mrs. Baker was before him, and seized it in her arms. She had been too preoccupied and bewildered to resent his first intrusion behind the partition, but this last familiarity with her sacred official property-albeit empty-capped the climax of her wrongs.

How dare you touch it?" she said, indignantly. "How dare you come in here? Who are you, anyway? Go out-

The stranger fell back with an amused deprecatory gesture, and a long. silent laugh. "I'm afraid you don't know me, after all!" he said, pleasantly. "Tm Harry Home, the department agent from the San Francisco office. My note of advice, No. 201, with my name on the envelope, seems to have been mis-carried, too."

Even in her fright and astonishment it flashed upon Mrs. Baker that she had sent that notice, too, to Hickory Hill. But with it all the feminine secretive instinct within her was now thoroughly aroused, and she kept silent.

"I ought to have explained," he went on, smilingly; "but you are quite right, Mrs. Baker," he added, nodding toward the bag. "As far as you know, I had no business to go near it. Glad to see you know how to defend Uncle Sam's property so well. I was only a bit puzzled to know" (pointing to the wire), "if that thing was on the bag when it was delivered to you?"

Mrs. Baker saw no reason to conceal Mrs. Baker saw no reason to conceal the truth. After all, this official was a man like the others, and it was just as well that he should understand her power. "It's only the expressman's foolishness," she said, with a slightly coquettish toss of her head. "He thinks it smart to tie some nonsense on that bag with the wire when he flings it down

Mr. Home, with his eyes on her pretty face, seemed to think it a not inhuman or unpardonable folly. "As long as he race, seemed to think it a not inhuman or unpardonable folly. "As long as he doesn't meddle with the inside of the bag, I suppose you must put up with it," he said, laughingly. A dreadful recollection that the Hickory Hill postmaster had used the inside of the bag to convey his feelishness game agrees her. It vey his foolishness, came across her. It would never do to confess it now. Her face must have shown some agitation, for the official resumed, with a half-paternal ha paternal, half-reassuring air: "But enough of this. Now, Mrs. Baker, to come to my business here! Briefly,

except so far as it may relieve you and some others that the department knows equally well from a certain responsibility, and, perhaps, anxiety. We are pretty well posted down there in all that concerns Laurel Run, and I think" (with a slight bow) "we've known all about you and John Baker. My only business here is to take your place to-night in receiving the 'omnibus way bag,' that you know arrives here at 5:30; doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Baker, hurriedly; "but it never has anything for us, except—"(she caught herself up quickly with a stammer, as she remembered the sighing Green's occasional offerings)—
"except a notification from Hickory Hill post office. It leaves there," she went on, with an affectation of precision, "at half-past eight exactly, and it's about an hour's run-seven miles by

"Exactly," said Mr. Home. "Well, I will receive the bag, open it and dispatch it again. You can, if you choose, take a holiday."

"But," said Mrs. Baker, as she remembered that Laurel Rus classes.

membered that Laurel Run always made a point of attending her evening levee on account of the superior leisure it offered, "there are the people who come for letters, you know.

"I thought you said there were no letters at that time," said Mr. Home,

quickly.
"No-but-but-"(with a slight hysterical stammer)—"the boys come all the same.'

"Oh!" said Mr. Home, dryly.

"And-O Lord!" But here the specta-cle of the possible discomfiture of Laurel Run at meeting the bearded face of Mr. Home, instead of her own smooth cheeks, at the window, combined with her nervous excitement, overcame her so that, throwing her little frilled apron over her head, she gave way to a parox-ysm of hysterical laughter. Mr. Home waited with amused toleration for it to stop, and when she had recovered resumed: "Now, I should like to refer an instant to my first communication to you. Have you got it handy?"

Mrs. Baker's face fell. "No, I sent

it over to Mr. Green, of Hickory Hill, for information."

Terrified at the sudden seriousness of the man's voice, she managed to gasp out, however, that, after her usual habit, she had not opened the official letters, but had sent them to her more ex-perienced colleague for advice and information; that she never could understand them herself. They made her head ache and interfered with her other duties; but he understood them and sent her word what to do. Remembering, also, his usual style of indorse-

ment, she grew red again. "And what did he say?" "Nothing; he didn't return them."

"Naturally," said Mr. Home, with a peculiar expression. After a few moments' silent stroking of his beard he suddenly faced the frightened woman.

"You oblige me, Mrs. Baker, to speak more frankly to you than I had intended. You have—unwittingly, I believe-given information to a man whom the government suspects of peculation. You have, without knowing it, arned the postmaster at Hickory Hill that he is suspected, and, as you might have frustrated our plans for tracing a series of embezzlements to their proper source, you will see that you might have also done great wrong to yourself as his only neighbor and the next responsible person. In plain words, we have traced the disappearance of money letters to a point when it lies between these two offices. Now, I have not the least hesitation in telling you that we do not suspect Laurel Run, and never have suspected it. Even the result of your thoughtless act, although it warned him, confirms our suspicion of his guilt. As to the warning, it has failed, or he has grown reckless, for another letter ever, will settle all doubt in the matter. When I open that bag in this office tonight and do not find a certain decoy letter in it which was last checked at Heavy Tree Crossing, I shall know that it remains in Green's possession at Hickory Hill."

She was sitting back in her chair, white and breathless. He glanced at her kindly, and then took up his hat. 'Come, Mrs. Baker, den't let this worry



GOING TO THE LITTLE IRON SAFE THAT STOOD IN THE CORNER.

As I told you at first, you have nothing to fear. Even your thoughtlessness and ignorance of rules has conressuess and ignorance of rules has contributed to show your own innocence. Nobody will ever be the wiser for this. We do not advertise our affairs in the department. Not a soul but yourself knows the real cause of my visit here. I will leave you here alone for awhile, so as to divert any suspicion. You will come, as usual, this evening, and be seen by your friends. I will only be here when the bag arrives, to open it. Good-by, Mrs. Baker; it's a nasty bit of business, but it's all in the day's work. I've seen worse, and, thank God, you're out of it."

She heard his footsteps retreat into the outer office and die out of the platform, the jingle of his spurs, and the hollow beat of his horsehoofs that seemed to find a dull echo in her own heart, and she was alone.

The room was very hot and very quiet; she could hear, the warping and creaking of the shingles under the relaxing of the nearly level sunbeams. The office clock struck seven. In the breathless silence that followed, a woodpecker took up his interrupted work on the roof, and seemed to beat out monotonously in her ear the last words of the stranger: Stanton Greena thief! Stanton Green, one of the "boys" John had helped out of the falling tunnel Stanton Green, whose old mother in the states still wrote letters to him at Laurel Run, in a few hours to a disgraced and ruined man forever! She remembered now, as a thoughtless woman remembers, tales of his extravagance and fast living, of which she had taken no heed, and, with a sense of shame, of presents sent her that she now clearly saw must have been far beyond his means. What would the boys say? What would John have said? Ah! what would John have

She started suddenly to her feet, white and cold as on that day that she had parted from John Baker before the tunnel. She put on her hat and man tle, and going to that little iron safe that stood in the corner, unlocked it, and took out its entire contents of gold and silver. She had reached the door when another idea seized her, and opening her desk she collected her stamps to the last sheet, and hurriedly rolled them up under her cape. Then, with a glance at the clock, and a rapid survey of the road from the platform she slipped from it, and seemed to be swallowed up in the waiting woods be-

(To be continued.)

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10:30 a. m. for Radfordand intermediate stations. No councetion by youd.

6:15 p. m. for Radford, Pulaski, Bristol. Connects at Radford for Bluefield and Pocahontas. Pullman sleepers to Memphis via Chattanooga.

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NORTH AND EASTBOUND, LEAVE ROANGE DAILY.

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12:50 p. m. for Hagerstown. Pullman sieepers to

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6:20 a. m. for Petersburg and Richmond.

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